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Testimony in support of Senate Bills 1037, 914, and 106

Wage theft can be devastating, especially for low-wage immigrant workers. As a student at Yale and someone that has worked in customer service, I know how much hard work workers put in every day to make our lives in New Haven possible.

The state has a responsibility to make sure workers are protected from abusive bosses and have a way of redressing their grievances. The Gourmet Heaven case in New Haven is a good example of how current policies do little to protect workers. Gourmet Heaven is a deli frequented by Yale students. The boss in this case was exploiting workers who were desperate for work. The owner paid workers less than six dollars an hour and required workers to work for 12 hours a day while denying them overtime pay. There was a lack of state intervention to stop this injustice until community members stepped up and called on the city to solve worker exploitation and wage theft. Even with all the public attention that has been brought to Gourmet Heaven workers and the workers working tirelessly with the Department of Labor, workers still have not received all the back wages the owner stole from them. There are countless cases of wage theft that occur in this state on a daily basis and it is impossible for each case of wage theft to receive the same amount of attention and level of organization that the Gourmet Heaven case received. Everyone deserves protection and this can be better achieved through strengthening penalties against businesses.

We need to increase the penalties that abusive employers that deprive workers of their rightful earnings. Not only do we need stronger penalties; we need better enforcement of the policies in place and the policies we are proposing today.

We have a moral obligation to make sure hardworking workers in Connecticut receive their wages.

In 2013, I worked with day laborers in my hometown of Oakland, California who were often victims of wage theft. This project made me aware that most workers that are victims of wage theft need state help the most. Workers are vulnerable. Many of them are immigrants and bosses threaten them if they speak out about the injustices they face in the workplace and use their legal status and threat of deportation against them.

A substantial amount of Connecticut residents live in poverty and bosses know they can take advantage of workers who are desperate for work to support their families. It is these workers who do not know they could be protected by the state and who are therefore more likely to accept wage theft.

We must raise the stakes to deter bosses from exploiting workers and depriving them of their wages. The proposed pieces of legislation are a step forward for our state.